Wildlife Detector-Dog and Inspector Training Program Q & As

1. Why are you developing this detector-dog program?
   Illegal trafficking in animals, animal parts and plants is contributing to the dramatic decline of many species in the wild. Animals such as elephants and rhinos are in serious danger of extinction due to poaching to supply the black market for ivory and rhino horn.

2. How will the dogs help?
   The ability of dogs to sniff out hidden wildlife products can greatly increase our detection coverage at high volume ports such as Miami, Chicago, Louisville, and Los Angeles. The Service has seen the great work the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Customs and Border Protection have done with their canine teams and we believe the Wildlife Detector-Dog program will bring us similar, much-needed success.

3. What good will it do?
   The program will enable a significant increase in our inspection capabilities. In a fraction of the time it takes a human inspector to examine a hundred or so packages, a dog can sniff literally thousands of packages or items of luggage on a conveyor belt.

4. Are there alternatives?
   Due to the sequester, we won't be able to fill wildlife inspector vacancies or hire additional inspectors to help stem illegal trade in protected species, though we hope that will be an option once again in the future. Experimenting with the use of wildlife detector dogs should prove to be an effective alternative staff multiplier for us in the battle to combat illegal wildlife trafficking.

5. How much does it cost?
   For the pilot program, we're moving existing staff into these positions so there's no additional personnel cost. We've invested about $90,000 for the initial training of the dogs and the 13-week program with the handlers. From here on, we're mainly looking at the cost of caring for the dog. We believe that the abilities of these dogs to detect wildlife scents will bring a significant return on this investment in terms of illegal shipments seized, smugglers arrested, and illegal traffic prevented. The law also allows for the confiscation of money and possessions that were used in or obtained as a result of illegal activities. In some cases, this can amount to hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars.

6. Has anyone else done this before?
   The Fish and Wildlife Service experimented with a single dog in the mid-1990s, and has deployed detector dogs borrowed from other agencies, but this is the first time in the U.S. that wildlife detector dogs have undergone an intensive training regimen and certification process like this. A few other countries in the European Union and Asia have successful programs in place.

7. Where will the teams be stationed?

The dogs will be based primarily at ports in Los Angeles, Miami, Chicago, and Louisville (UPS facility) as these are wildlife importation and smuggling hubs. However, they may also visit facilities in other cities, and we hope eventually to be able to expand the program across the country.

8. What do you expect the result to be?
We expect increased smuggling interceptions and additional prosecutions. Additionally, we think that this capability will act as deterrence to people contemplating sending, shipping, or transshipping illegal wildlife products to or through the United States.

9. When will the dogs start working?
This class of Wildlife Detector Dog teams should be in operation at their designated ports in about 30 days, after acclimation, additional training, and preparation.

10. What is the next step?
This is a pilot program and we will be watching the results closely. If it proves to be as successful as we think it will, it may be expanded, or the teams could deploy for short periods to cover other ports.

11. What programs has USDA trained dogs for prior to this?
The USDA program has trained dogs for a number of functions, including: airport passenger clearance for the USDA, Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Protection, and foreign countries such as Taiwan, Japan, Mexico, Cayman Islands, Canada, South Africa and Puerto Rico; the Brown Tree Snake Program on Guam; state agencies, including Florida's Agriculture Law Enforcement Division, State of Florida Department of Plant Industry, and California's Department of Food and Agriculture; and various domestic invasives initiatives, such as the Asian longhorn beetle, giant African land snail, nutria and brown marmorated stink bug.

12. Where did these dogs come from?
Dogs are obtained from shelters, breeders and private owners, nationwide. The USDA looks for beagles, beagle mixes, Labrador retrievers and Labrador retriever mixes for their different training programs.

13. What have the wildlife detector dogs be trained to detect?
The dogs have been trained on a number of key scents, including elephant ivory and rhino horn. Once the dogs are established in the field, they can then be trained on any number of additional scents depending on national and local needs.

14. What are the names of the dogs?
Viper, Butter, Lancer and Locket

15. How does USDA pick the dogs?
USDA looks for dogs between one and three years old that have a high food drive and are energetic, nonaggressive, and outgoing.

16. What's the career life of a detector dog?
    A detector dog's career typically lasts 5 – 7 years.

17. What happens to the dog after its working life is over?
    When it is time for a detector dog to retire, the handler will usually adopt the dog from the program.